

KISSIMMEE RIVER...

captains, cowboys and canoes



Before railroads and highways provided transportation into South Florida, steamboat captains ruled the Kissimmee River – hauling people and cargo along its curving course, which was described in an 1899 *Kissimmee Valley Gazette* article:

"Birds of all kinds are in sight the whole way: flocks of ducks, coots, herons, cranes, limpkins, curlews, plume birds and water turkeys without end; also alligators, rabbits and water snakes, and plenty of fish, too. In its narrowness, in the rampant growth of water plants along its low banks... and above all in the appalling, incredible, bewildering crookedness of its serpentine body, it is indeed an extraordinary river."

Transportation and commerce, including ranching and farming, increased after a wealthy Philadelphian named Hamilton Disston bought 4 million acres of Florida land in 1881.

Disston dredged canals to interconnect a small chain of lakes north of the Kissimmee River. The newly dredged canals fed into the Kissimmee River, creating a navigable waterway from Kissimmee to Lake Okeechobee and rendering drained land suitable for farming and ranching.



Top: An 1883 engraving of Kissimmee River pioneer Captain John Pearce's log house and out buildings at Fort Basinger. Captain Pearce was the last owner of the steamboat "Mary Belle," which operated on the Kissimmee River until it was sunk in 1884.

Center: A postcard depicting a sheep ranching venture on the Kissimmee River, circa 1901.

Left: A group of men at a steamboat landing on the Kissimmee River, circa 1890.



A description of a stewed anhinga dinner on the Kissimmee River from George H. Preble's *A Canoe Expedition Into the Everglades in 1842*:

"Paddled along until sundown, and camped on the left-hand bank. Supper, a 'Grecian Lady' stewed; horrible cannibal that I am, found the 'lady' a very good morsel. Memo: Grecian Lady, a water-fowl, sometimes called a water-turkey."



"The river twists and turns in every direction... Duck (teal, wood-duck, pintail, mallards) curlew, snipe were here in thousands. The river here touches the prairie and pine timber is only about 1/2 mile back..."

– Capt. Stanley Bullock of the "Minnehaha," a 30 ft. sloop on a trip down the Kissimmee River, 1891

Above: Curving oxbows on the Kissimmee River in a photograph taken by John Kunkel Small in 1919 near Fort Basinger.

Right: A postcard depicting the steamboat "Okeechobee" on Lake Tohopekaliga, which is one of the small lakes north of the Kissimmee River interconnected by Disston's drainage project.



"They hauled freight, such as alligator hides, otter and coon skins, oranges and grapefruit, as well as supplies for the ranchers and settlers along the river route, as well as all passenger service on the Kissimmee and Caloosahatchee Rivers."

– Steamboat Captain A. S. Gilbert, 1890s